

Is the doctrine of *Arthāvada* compatible with the idea of Sruti?—The basic dilemma in the revelatory-authorities texts of any tradition?

Traditions, it seems, cannot live without the notion of a 'Final' authoritative text which gives *all* the truth, that is, or can be and which provides answers to all questions that can possibly be asked. And yet, they cannot accept everything that is said in the Sruti as true. For the simple reason that it goes *against* what is 'known' to be true on the basis of a large body of experience shared by human beings everywhere. Also, there is an apparent incompatibility between many of the statements in the text, and hence reason can not accept incompatibility in what is claimed to be true. Thus, both perceptual experience and rational requirement stand in the way of the acceptance of the so-called authoritative foundational, final, complete and infallible text as 'really' such and force the believer in them to adopt all sort of strategies to 'save' the text from obvious obscurities and inconsistencies, so that somehow the 'claims' may still be sustained in the face of incontrovertial evidence against them. The doctrine known as *arthavāda* was one of such strategies adopted in the Indian tradition. The term is primarily associated with what has come to be known as the Mimamsa school of philosophy in India, but there is no necessity for this. The term may be applied to any attempt which tries to save the

'truth' of that which is regarded, by definition, as incapable of having any 'untruth' in it and yet which probably appears to be full of it.

Arthvāda, in fact, may be of many kinds even though Mimāṃsā thinkers have addressed themselves to certain types only. The Vedāntins have their own *arthvāda*, though they do not talk of it in that way. In fact, if the idea of *Sṛuti* is generalised to mere any text that is treated as 'authoritative' by any tradition, then each such tradition would also have its own doctrine of *arthvāda* as they are two sides of the same coin, the one necessitate the other. Thus, one would not only have traditions of *arthvāda* say, the Kurana or the Bible which may be legitimately regarded as *Sṛuti* in the accepted sense of the term, but also the writings of such thinkers as Marx which have been treated virtually in the same way by those who believe in them.

But if the writings of Marx are accepted, even provisionally, as *Sṛuti*, than the way is opened for an investigation into the realm of what may be called the "secular *Sṛuti*" and the diverse traditions of *arthvāda* that have been developed by their votaries in the context of their interpretation.

The notion of a 'secular *Sṛuti*' may appear as a contradiction-in-terms to many who are habitual to see the idea. Only in the context of some infallible authority, whether divine

or superhuman even human beings who had attained perfection such as the Mahāvīra and the Buddha.

Ultimately, it is the attitude of the believers which determines what is to be regarded as Sruti, and not the source from which it is supposed to emerge. After all, even the authority of God has not been able to convince the believers in the rival traditions of revelations as the Judeous, Christian, Islamic world or those that have occurred in the Indian tradition.

There is, thus, no basic difference between the non-secular srutis and the secular śrutis except perhaps in the fact that the latter have generally not had the comprehensiveness and the coercion of the former, at least till recent times. Marxism may seem to be an exception to that, as it has not only a complete theory of history and the persecution of the heretics, but also the coercive power of the state to enforce all this. But Marx left the comprehensive blue print of this revelatory text to the future when the pseudo-history of man would have ended and ‘real’ history begun.

Marx, however, stands only midway between the two extreme poles of ‘sruti’ which may be called the ‘sacred’ and the ‘secular’ as he is too closely associated with the coercive power of the state and the ‘prophetic’ mode of thinking which is so common with those streams of the ‘sruti’ that derive from the

Hebruic tradition. The ‘secular’ version becomes more apparent in the attitude displayed by those who call themselves ‘Wittgensteiniens’, ‘Kantians’, ‘Hegelians’ or the many other varieties of them, as there is no question here either of using of coercive power of the state to persecute or convert those who do not agree with the way one understands the ‘master’. Yet, though the ‘prophetic-persecutory’ complex is absent, there is the same acrimonious debate amongst the ‘disciples’ about the real meaning of what the master said. But this can only occur if the so-called ‘master’ is regarded as ‘superhuman’, that is, someone not afflicted with the conditions which are the fate of every normal human being. In other words, he is not regarded as a human being who is inevitably subject to fallibility and incompleteness in *all* that he say, or does or feels. Not only this, it is to take what he has written too seriously in the sense that every word, or even comma(,) that has been used has to be examined microscopically to get the hidden ‘real’ meaning which is there in the text and which, if discovered, will be found to be not only “true” but full of such profound insight into both the human situation and the reality in which it is embedded or which encompasses it so completely that the truth about the one inevitably involves or implies the ‘truth’ about the other. But, it is obvious that such an “insight” can hardly be the same not only across different “texts” by different authors but even among the different texts by the same author.

The problem of the “identity” of both the “texts” and the “author” is puzzling indeed, even though little attention has been paid to it in the *recent* secret discussion on the subject. The problem, of course, is compounded by the fact that those who try so assiduously to “discern” or “discover” the real meaning of the so-called texts seldom agree among themselves, whether they consider themselves as ‘disciples’ or ‘opponents’ of the ‘master’ who profounded the texts and proclaimed the ‘truth’ through it.

The problem basically arises not because of something inherent in the specific situation, particularly as both the problem of “unity” and the unitariness of understanding is present in other context also, but because of the attitude that one brings to the understanding of the texts as they are treated not as something uttered or written by a human being with all his frailties, inconsistencies, incompletenesses and unclearities which are the essential lot of every man or woman in this world. Every one knows this in his or her own case but somehow refuses to believe this in the case of those whom one regards as a master. It is, thus, the attitude which creates the Sruti as once the attitude changes and the so-called Sruti regarded as human creation it no more carries an aura of infallibility about it. It is seen, for, what it is, something full of inconsistencies, incoherences, contradictions, vain claims to truth which can easily been controverted by reference to counter-evidence and

fallacies inherent in the arguments given in support of it. It is not that one does not see the positive achievements and admire the insights or wonder at the skill displayed in the construction of the ‘Houses of Reason’ that the masters built. One can not read a Plato or a Kant or any other great thinker without these feelings at every step, but once one sees all texts as human creations the attitude remains the same, appreciative and critical at the same time. One is prepared to learn and learns all the time, but one is also dissatisfied at every page and turn of the argument. One sees through the little tricks that the ‘master’ has played and, though one excuses them, one is not taken in by them.

The same thing happens to the Vedas, Upnisads, The Gītā or Kuran, the Bible, the Torah or any of the other innumerable texts revered as revelation by the devotees or the disciples who can not bear to treat or think them otherwise. It is true that the attitude to these is in-built almost from the moment of one’s birth, as one is always born into a family and a community which treats them as such and thus, one can hardly even think of treating them otherwise. In addition, in the case of some of them there are severe punishments, including death, if one expresses any doubt about their being the repository of all truth that ever was, or is, or shall be. But most members of such communities are aware, however dimly, that there are persons belonging to other communities who do not regard those. Sacred

text in the same way. And, they obviously do not see these “sacred texts” of other communities in the same manner as the members of those community do. Paradoxically each sees the ‘holes’ in the other’s claim but somehow fails to see them in one’s own.

The situation thus created would have been comic except for the fact that the devotees and the disciples of each supposedly sacred text feel it their sacred duty to fight those who believe in their own ‘sacred’ text and even eliminate them from the face of the earth, if they can. The history of religious wars is well known but the history of intra-religious wars has been as bloody and full of passionate hatred and vengeance as the former. Who does not know of the perennial conflict between the Shi'a and Sunni or the other various sects in the Islam. As for Christianity, the conflict between the Catholic and the Protestant is well known, though the far deeper conflict between western and eastern or “Greek” Christianity is seldom talked about. The persecution of the heretics has been there since the birth of the Christianity itself, but no one seems to see that the concept of heresy and the persecution of those who are guilty of it is “in-built” in the very notion of “orthodoxy”, as the latter can not be understood without the former.

The problems of “orthodoxy” and “heresy” however arise not because there is anything in the so-called sacred texts to

necessitate it, though they may certainly facilitate or obstruct depending upon the tone and content of what they say in them, it is the interpretation of the text by human beings which leads to the difference and as everyone knows, the problems of “interpretation” can not be settled by all the strategies developed by the discipline of hermeneutics as they derive not so much from the texts but from the interests and attitude of the interpreter. This becomes clearer when we consider the history of interpretation of texts which will be considered as “secular” by everybody as, ostensibly they have nothing to do with what has been called “religion” up till now. There is as much dispute about what an Hegel or a Kant or a Wittgenstein really meant and in spite of the labours of so many scholars, little seems to have been settled. The example of Wittgenstein’s “disciples” fighting among themselves regarding what the ‘master’ really meant reminds one of the differences between, say, Padmapada and Sureswar who were also immediate disciples of Śāṅkara. It may be remembered in this connection that Śāṅkara’s Bhāṣya on the Brahma Sūtras is itself not a Sruti, even though the Advaitins generally treat it in the same way as they do the Brahman Sūtras which paradoxically is also not a Sruti according to the tradition. In fact, even the Gītā has not been accorded the status of Sruti, even though such a claim has been made for it. Only the Upnisads, and amongst those which are known by that name only some of them, are accorded that

status. Yet, both the Brahma Sūtra and the Gītā are accorded, by common consent, an authority, at least among the Vedāntins, the same status as the Upnisads. But surprisingly even the works of the foundational masters of the different “Schools” of Vedānta enjoy the same status from their followers for the simple reason that they treat them with the same attitude as do the followers of disciples anywhere else. The name of the ‘master’ or the ‘text’ does not matter, for the disciples or the follower it contents the final truth, even though there is always a dispute even amongst them regarding what this final truth is.

The dispute about the interpretation is perennial and in case some of the disciples get into positions of power, they do not hesitate to eliminate those who espouse or support a different interpretation by fair means or foul. The story of the ‘right’ and the ‘left’ deviation in Marxism is well known. So also is the fate of those who espouse them during the times when Stalin was in power. Luckily, in most other cases of “secular” sruti the situation has not been as desperate and bloody as in the case of Marxism but even in the case of the so-called sacred srutis the story has not always been the same as the one usually associated with the Judaic, Christian, Islamic traditions. Both the Vedic and the Āgmic traditions of India tell a different story. It is not that there has been no conflict or abuse or denunciation of the one party by the other and at

times even violent conflict between them. But there is no evidence of sustained persecution and large scale killings of one by the other as is so well documented in the history of Judaic religion. In fact, the Natsi and the Soviet persecutions were not something new in the long history of the west in this regard. The Chinese are perhaps another examples where the conflict among confucianism and Taoism and Buddhism never took that violent turn which is so evident in the history of Christianity or Islam in the West. These different examples suggest that systematic and violent persecution of the “other” especially those who were regarded as heretics is not endemic to either so called ‘sacred’ or ‘secular’ śruti as has been generally considered up till now. It can occur in the case of both, especially if what is regarded as Śruti itself demands such an elimination of those whose refuse to be “converted” or oppose or differ from what it proclaims as the final truth in the matter. This becomes easier if, those who believe in such a kind of “Śruti”, whether it be scared or secular, also exercise political power through which they can coerce and kill others. On the other hand if the Śruti itself allows a pluralism than it is difficult for its believer to persecute those who differ, for the simple reason that the Śruti itself permits a difference of opinion in regard to what is to be ultimately considered as true or real.

But, whatever, be the character of the texts regarded as Śruti and whether it be ‘secular’ or ‘sacred’, it always creates a

problem for those who regard it as such. This is inevitable as the text is bound to consist not only of inner inconsistencies, but also of statements which are false or improbable in the perspective of the empirical knowledge that we have about the world. The problem of the ‘truth’ of empirical statements always haunts the text which is regarded as Sruti, as empirical knowledge continuously enlarges, involves and modifies itself due to the collective experience of mankind. This advancing knowledge disturbs the truth of the empirical statements in the texts known as Sruti continuously and challenges the believer to “save” their truth in face of the mounting evidence against them. The account of creation has given in the scared texts of the Judaic-Christian-Islamic traditions, is a case in point, as the increasing evidence for the theory of evolution poses a serious challenge to it. There are other innumerable instances where the “believers” in the sacred texts had to resort to diverse subterfuges and transperant unsuccessful devices to ‘save’ the truthfulness of the sacred text. But these attempts only satisfies the believers, for they would go to any length to save their belief from the least little bit of doubt in it. It is well known, at least among Psychologists that human being can not tolerate for long what Festinger has called “Cognitive Dissonance”. They have to come to terms with it in some way or other. But in purely cognitive context the situation is met with the other ways which do not involve such transparently disceptive manouvers as are

adopted by the “believers” in a context which they persist regarding as purely cognitive. In other context, such as those of the natural sciences, one either gives up the theory or modifies it or questions the correctness of the counter evidence and ask the observation or the experiment to be repeated.

The usual strategy adopted in the case of the texts which are regarded as *Sruti* by the believers to treat those portions of the text which seem to be “obviously” false in case of increasingly accumulating counter-evidence is to argue that the seemingly “false” portions of these texts should be interpreted not in a literal but a metaphorical manner. This is the use of language which primarily occurs in poetic and literary contexts where the question of “truth” is not raised in the same manner as is done in purely cognitive context and in case someone does it, its total irrelevance is immediately seen by everybody. The recourse to non-literal interpretation of ostensibly declarative statements which are clearly empirical in nature opens the door to a plurality of interpretations amongst which it is impossible to decide which was the “real” meaning of the text concerned. This as everybody knows, is a virtue in the poetic creations of man where the multiplicity of meanings adds to the richness and profoundity of what is being conveyed by the text concerned. This, however, is generally treated as a defect in context where thought is supposed to be engaged in a purely cognitive enterprise. One may argue that the ‘poetic’ component

of the texts regarded as *Sruti* gives them a richness and profoundity which they would otherwise lack. But the dilemma remains, for if the text is treated in this manner than many of the questions which are both vital and inevitable in the context of cognitive claims of truth cannot be raised in respect of it. One enters the realm of feeling and imagination which undoubtedly has a validity of its own, but where questions of ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’ become either totally irrelevant or assume a meaning which is radically different from the one usually associated with them. Once the door is open to a metaphorical interpretation of the text which is supposed to be “truer” then the so-called literal interpretation which is contemptuously dismissed as trivial, there can be no limit to what the text “really” means as it all depends on the insight, ingenuity and profoundity of the interpreter concerned.

This is the realm where *arthvāda* takes over and the text begins to be divided in what is to be taken as really authoritative and what is merely rhetorical in nature. All metaphorical interpretations are not, and need not be rhetorical. But, the rhetorical clement generally derives its strength from the metaphorical use of language.

The classical Indian interpretation of the vedic text introduce the notion of *arthvāda* to get around the difficulty of having to deal with the “truth” of empirical statements in it

which could be so easily questioned. The mimamsa thinkers therefore adopted the strategy of treating all declarative statements in the *Sruti* as being primarily there in order to facilitate the acceptance of the injunctive statements mentioned therein. Thus, only the *Vidhinisedha Vakyas* were to be regarded as genuine portions of the *Sruti* all the rest being treated as ancillary to it. This, of course, raise another problem for them as many of the injunctive statements in what they regarded *Sruti*, were of the from “one who wants this, ought to perform this *yajna*”. Standard formulation of which was “*Swargakāmo yajet*” But as many of these injunctive statements were for the achievement of empirical ends, such as rain or begetting a son, the effectivity of those injunction could easily be checked by seeing whether they really occurred or one really get a son. The usual way to get around the difficulty was to suggest that the relevant *yajña* was not performed in proper manner. On the other hand, in the case of the achievements of such non-empirical ends as the achievement of *Swarga* they developed the notion of *Apūrva* and *Adṛṣṭa* to suggest that an invisible chain of consequences occurred because of the performance of *yajña* to ensure that the desired result occurred after death. In a sense, the notions of *apūrva* and *adṛṣṭa* even in the case of those sacrifices which were performed for the achievement of empirical ends, as there was always a time-interval between the performance of the sacrifice and the attainment of the desired

result. In any case, this bold attempt on the part of the *mīmāṃsā* thinkers to save the ‘truth’ of the *Sṛuti* resulted not only in the verb-centric theory of language but also in the most ingenious and subtle attempt to treat the whole informative discourse, including the names of gods, kings and persons and events associated with them, as essentially having no independent meaning of its own but as deriving its whole meaningfulness from its relationship with the injunctive statements which command to do something or another. Prabhākār’s is perhaps the most ingenious attempt in this regard, though sufficient attention has not been paid to it, as far as I know.

The doctrine of the *Arthvāda* takes a different turn with the *Vedāntins* who treated the *Upniṣadic* part of the *Veda* as *Sṛuti* proper and treated all the sentences, except those referred to *Brahaman*, as having the character of *arthvāda* for them, the injunctive statements found in the *Veda* certainly had a validity but only in the realm of *Vyavahāra* and not in the realm of *parmārtha*. In this regard they differed radically from the *mīmāṃsakas* who considered them alone to be the authoritative part of the *Veda*. Surprisingly, however, they agreed with the *mīmāṃsakas* in not according any authority to the descriptive-declarative-informative sentences relating to the empirical world. Śāṅkara’s well known statement in this regard that ‘even if a hundred *Sṛutis* were to declare that fire is cold no

one would believe it”, has generally been laid down or ignored all together. So, the so-called *Sruti* in the Indian tradition has only been regarded as ‘authoritative’ either for the injunctive statements that are contained therein or for statements concerning *Brahman*, but *never* in respect of any statement concerning matters of fact which may be found there. Ultimately it is only that which is unknowable by sensory experience and reason, which is regarded as the proper subject matter of *Sruti*. The rest is all basically irrelevant as no question of truth can, or ought, to be raised regarding it.

The ‘*arthvāda*’, thus, is the necessary accomplement of *Sruti*, as once a text, whether secular or sacred, is regarded as ‘*Sruti*’, the believers have to come to terms with the ‘ostensibly’ and ‘provable’ false statements in it. For a text to be regarded as *Sruti*, it has to be considered both infallible and complete, a requirement which no human creation can ever fulfill. What is to be regarded as *arthvāda* may however, vary depending upon what is considered authoritative by the believers concerned, or those among them who are given the power to take a final decision in this matter. Thus, what is regarded as “*arthvāda*” may be different even in respect of the same text giving rise to different sects of ‘*Sampradāyas*’, Schools of interpretations, each accuses the other of misinterpreting the text or doing injustice to it. This, it may be noted, is generally not the case with the literary text where differences in interpretation are

supposed to add to the richness of the texts and the multi-dimensionality of meanings content in it. This is an important difference between the literary texts and the “texts regarded as *Sruti*” because the latter are suppose to be cognitive in nature and hence are believed to entertain a “truth-claim” in the ordinary sense of the word.

A comparative study of what has been regarded as “*arthvāda*” in the texts regarded as “*Sruti*”, whether secular or sacred, in different culture and civilizations has not been made. But in case such a comparative study is undertaken it is bound to yield rich results and may even enlighten us regarding the dominant strategies which different cultures and civilization have adopted in this regard.

The term “*arthvāda*” is, perhaps, not very adequate to convey what exactly is intended in this context. The terms “*arthabhasa*” or “*arthādhyāsa*” or “*arthāropa*” may perhaps be more adequate as they at least indicate that the acceptance of the usual meaning associated with the words or the sentences is mistaken. Such a situation occurs regularly in poetic contexts where it is called *Vyañjanā* or even *Dhwani*. But the notion of *Laksana*, *Vyañjanā* and *Dhwani* have not been used in the context of thought, though there is no reason why there are, with suitable modifications should not be extended to this domain also. In fact, the whole peripherelia of *Alamkāra*

Dhwani and *Rasa* may be transposed to the realms of thought, an enterprise that has not even been attempted up till now. Some post-modernist thinkers have done something of this sort, but mostly “unconsciously” as they do not seem to show an awareness of the distinction between the texts which are regarded as “*Sruti*” and those which are not regarded as such. The difference, as we have said earlier, emanates from the attitude which one entertains in respect of a text resulting in regarding it not as a work of mortal human being with all its weaknesses, but of someone who can say nothing wrong and has said *all* that can ever be said on anything whatsoever.